



PRESS RELEASE
FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
December 24, 2014
By Sgt. Balinda O'Neal

Alaska Guardsman's kennel offers healing to battle wounded, weary

JOINT BASE ELMENDORF-RICHARDSON, Alaska – A 176th Wing maintenance officer with more than 16 years combined service in the U.S. Air Force, Air Force Reserves and Alaska Air National Guard has taken on a new mission of making a difference in the lives of the battle wounded and battle weary.

Alaska Air National Guard Maj. Jennifer Casillo, and her husband, Rick, a five-time Iditarod musher, are the co-owners and operators of a professional race kennel known as Battle Dawgs Racing, named in honor of servicemembers and veterans who they call Warriors.

"The true battle for a veteran begins when they get home," Casillo said. "We dedicated the kennel to providing a platform to expose Warriors to therapeutic and exciting experiences by harnessing the natural splendor of Alaska's landscape and the power of sled dogs."

In its third year, Battle Dawgs Racing, based out of Big Lake, Alaska, focuses on long-distance events, including the Iditarod Trail Sled Dog Race. BDR also has a partnership with Alaska's Healing Hearts, a national organization offering year-round outdoor recreational opportunities for America's brave service members and their families.

Alaska's Healing Hearts activities include fishing, hunting, skiing, rodeo, dog-sledding tours and various other outdoor pursuits. BDR's partnership with Alaska's Healing Hearts is another way to reach out to Warriors and provide them the opportunity to use its kennel and services as a healing tool.

"It's a perfect relationship," said Jessie Lakin, a staff member at Alaska's Healing Hearts who is BDR's director of operations.

Lakin, a combat veteran himself, believes in the healing power of dogs through engagement. He also recognizes that sled dogs' teamwork remind Warriors of camaraderie, something they might be missing from their time in service.

"The strength of a dog team is insane," Lakin said. "You have 16 dogs pulling a sled with 500lbs and dragging it over 1,000 miles. If you put a Warrior who is struggling around these dogs for 10 minutes, the one-on-one connection that forms is just unbelievable."

Helping veterans and giving back to the local community is a passion of BDR and Alaska's Healing Hearts. Both organizations rely on corporate sponsors and the generosity of their supporters to provide and fund programs at no cost to Warriors.

"I love it when I can spend a whole day in the dog yard; it just clears my mind," Casillo said. "We witness this in our Warriors. They are able to let everything fall away for a while and are able to bond with the dogs and our team."

Apart from her duties as a maintenance officer in the Alaska Air National Guard and caring for the 27 dogs in her back yard, Casillo is a civilian helicopter pilot. She flies for a local company and also started Aurora Heli-Expeditions, a summer glacier tour business that she and her husband began three years ago.

"We offer free helicopter rides to Alaska's Healing Hearts Warriors [and take them up on aerial sightseeing tours,]" Casillo said. "In addition, Battle Dawgs Racing and Aurora-Heli Expeditions are committed to providing free glacier dog sled tours in the summer and hosting the Warriors at our kennel during the winter training season."

At the kennel, Warriors play an integral role in helping the BDR team train for upcoming races and events. In addition, Warriors will help the BDR team prepare for the 2015 Iditarod Trail Sled Dog Race where Rick will be competing in his sixth year. Casillo will be cheering him on from overseas. During the race, Casillo will be on her sixth deployment to the Horn of Africa in support of Operation Enduring Freedom.

"The Battle Dawgs Racing team is going to have to rally together and help fill a big void during those months she is gone, but we are all excited for her," explained Lakin. "Her military experience comes over into her civilian life just beyond anything we could ever expect. We will all adapt and overcome."

"I'm going to do what I can from afar to cheer and support my team," Casillo said. "Rick and Jessy are going to operate while I'm gone, and then, I'll jump right back in when I'm home. Battle Dawgs won't miss a beat."

Battle Dawgs Racing has plans to bring up two Warriors from the East Coast to be at the start of the 2015 Iditarod. In addition, BDR will offer handler slots to a few lucky Alaska National Guardsmen who will help out at the ceremonial start in Anchorage.

"The Iditarod is seen all over the world and everybody is able to witness the strength and power of these dogs," Lakin said. "Allowing people to share the privilege that we have every day just being around these amazing animals is the best part; it's hard to beat, definitely the best job I've ever had, and it's all volunteer."

Battle Dawgs Racing and Alaska's Healing Hearts send the message that as American citizens and with the faith and support of others, nothing is unachievable, no matter the circumstance—all wounds heal. BDR encourages all supporters to follow the team on its Battle Dawgs Racing Facebook page for upcoming events and volunteer opportunities.

"If you know a Warrior who is struggling or even having a hard time, you can nominate them using our application form on our website battledawgsracing.com," Casillo said. "Come out and bring your family, spend a week in our cabin and just get away and disconnect from things for a while. We will put you to work on the dogs."

###

Cutlines:

121213-Z-CA180-004

Battle Dawgs Racing owners Maj. Jennifer Casillo, an aircraft maintenance officer with the 176th Wing's Maintenance Squadron, and her husband, Rick, five-time Iditarod musher, hold their eight-week-old Alaskan Huskies at the Alaska National Guard Warrior and Family Services Family holiday party held at the National Guard armory on Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson Dec. 13. The Casillos brought in a litter of sled dog puppies for families to enjoy at the party. (U.S. Army National Guard photo by Sgt. Balinda O'Neal)

001

Alaska Air National Guard Maj. Jennifer Casillo, an aircraft maintenance officer with the 176th Wing's Maintenance Squadron, hugs her husband, Rick, a five-time Iditarod musher, at the start of the 2014 Iditarod in Willow, Alaska. (Photo courtesy Battle Dawgs Racing)

004

Battle Dawgs Racing, in partnership with Alaska's Healing Hearts, offers a variety of programs year-round, including a night at the camp on Colony Glacier and fly fishing in Kenai. (Photo courtesy Battle Dawgs Racing)

141213-Z-CA180-071

Brig. Gen. Mike Bridges, Alaska National Guard acting adjutant general; Battle Dawgs Racing owners Rick Casillo and Maj. Jennifer Casillo, an aircraft maintenance officer with the 176th Wing's Maintenance Squadron; smile for a photo at the Alaska National Guard Warrior and Family Services Family holiday party held at the National Guard armory on Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson Dec. 13. (U.S. Army National Guard photo by Sgt. Balinda O'Neal)

141213-Z-CA180-078

Brig. Gen. Mike Bridges, Alaska National Guard acting adjutant general, holds an eight-week-old Alaskan Husky at the Alaska National Guard Warrior and Family Services Family holiday party held at the National Guard armory on Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson Dec. 13. (U.S. Army National Guard photo by Sgt. Balinda O'Neal)

For photos, please visit the following DVIDS link: <http://dvidshub.net/r/pc5nsu>

